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Church of Scientology Finally Gets Foothold on NSA

Data yielded grudgingly under Information Act

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The National Security Agency is the kind of operation in which the public affairs office telephone is answered with a four-digit number rather than a name, a practice that even the CIA has abandoned.

So perhaps it wasn't surprising when NSA time after time told the Founding Church of Scientology of Washington that it could find no information in its files about the church, nor its founder, L. Ron Hubbard.

The church had made repeated requests over a number of months, asking NSA under the Freedom of Information Act if that massive electronic spy agency had any such information.

The church was no stranger to the federal government's investigatory and information gathering arms, nor to controversy, most of which centered over the use of a lie-detector like device called an E-meter to assess the mental and spiritual condition of a subject.

But of late, the church has been striking back at the FBI, the Internal Revenue Service, the CIA and the NSA, chiefly through the courts and the information act.

WHILE IT WAS CARRYING on a game of thrust-and-parry with NSA through the mails, the church was also suing the CIA. In the course of that suit, the CIA admitted that it had 16 documents relating to the church in its files — all received from NSA.

Armed with that information, the church went back to NSA this June and demanded once again that the agency own up to having information in its files.

This month, the reply from NSA was received. Yes, the agency acknowledged that it had found at least 15 of the 16 documents identified by the CIA. But it still claimed that the earlier denials were accurate.

That claim was made in a letter to the church from John R. Harney, who identified himself as a "freedom of information appeal authority."

Harney wrote that the documents "were located in warehouse storage and were found only on the basis of the information we received from the CIA; they could not be found on the basis of the subject matter content."

"I must therefore reaffirm the NSA information officer's previous statements that no information was located in agency files concerning the Church of Scientology under any of the headings or in each of the

categories, as specified in your previous requests, in this agency's records," Harney wrote.

IN ANY EVENT, WOULD NSA now release the documents, whatever they are? No. Wrote Harney: "The National Security Agency is precluded by Title 18 U.S.C. 793 from providing information concerning classified communications intelligence activities except to those persons authorized to receive such information."

That admission didn't go unnoticed by the scientologists. A spokesman, the Rev. Hugh Wilhere, declared that "the fact that the NSA is holding files and conducting 'foreign intelligence activity' on a church by their own admission is highly incriminating in itself."

There are those in NSA who apparently would like to say more in their own defense on this issue. Information officer Norman Boardman, who was involved in some of the correspondence that assured the church that no such documents existed, is one of them.

Yesterday, Boardman was asked how, for instance, the CIA could find the documents supplied by NSA, but NSA could not. While supplying no direct answer, Boardman insisted that "there are two-sides to this thing."

When a questioner on the telephone asked him to expand on that, he said he would call back. When he did, he said only, "I'm not prepared to go beyond 'no comment.'"

True to the form it has been developing, the church yesterday went to court. It filed a Freedom of Information action in U.S. District Court here to force release of the documents.

And, it asked the court to force NSA to make a search of its records, a complete search this time.